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ABSTRACT

College faculty/staff members (n=76) and college students (n=212) from a small liberal arts college in a suburban area in the Northeast United States participated in this study. Participants completed a survey consisting of items pertaining to features and determinants of college students' smoking that measured their feeling associated with smoking behavior and perceptions of college-age smokers. Questions regarding smoking history were used to determine the participants' smoking status of never, former, or current. Across these three smoking status groups, no significant group differences were found on ratings of attractiveness, contentment, and sophistication. Attractiveness was rated similarly by all groups; raters generally perceived smokers as unattractive. Likewise, smokers were viewed as generally unsophisticated and all groups perceived smokers as rarely appearing content. Overall ratings indicated that smokers were generally seen as rarely secure, intelligent, physically fit, or energized. On these variables, significant differences emerged among the three smoking status groups. However, although ratings of these characteristics were found to differ significantly across groups, no group gave these favorable characteristics a mean rating of rarely or higher, therefore indicating a pervasive negative view of smokers. On each of these four characteristics, current smokers gave the lowest ratings, which indicates that they hold the most negative views of smokers. Current and former smokers also gave more negative ratings of smokers' perceived confidence and perceived alertness than those who never smoked. In contrast, on the remaining five characteristics, current smokers gave more favorable ratings than did the other two groups. Current smokers perceived smokers as appearing significantly less anxious, less jittery, more mature, more adequate, and more considerate than did the other two smoking groups. (Contains 4 tables and 25 references.) (MKA)

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Views of College Student Smoking:

A Comparison of Smokers and Nonsmokers

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Introduction

Cigarette smoking is widely regarded to be the leading preventable cause of death in the United States, claiming more than 400,000 lives per year (Hanson, & Venturelli, 1998; US Department of Health and Human Services, 1989). While generally cigarette consumption has been declining among the adult population, tobacco usage by one subset of this population, college students, has recently increased at an alarming rate (Wechsler, Rigotti, Gledhill-Hoyt, & Lee, 1998). Smoking among college students has risen by 28% between 1993 and 1997 (Wechsler, et al., 1998). Ironically, cigarette usage is increasing among those who have the greatest access to information about the health risks of smoking (Wechsler, et al., 1998).

Despite this behavioral trend, it is not clear whether perceptions of smokers are now becoming more positive on college campuses. Past research has revealed that some people, particularly nonsmokers, harbor generally negative views of smokers and associate a number of negative attributes with smoking. For instance, when comparing smokers to nonsmokers, the latter perceived smokers as less healthy, less desirable as a date, less attractive while smoking, less sexy, less feminine, less sophisticated, less mature, less masculine, less conventional, and less self-confident (Hines, Fretz, & Nollen, 1998) and less sensible (Llyod, Lucas, & Fernbach, 1997). Nonsmoking college students also believed that smoking would lead to negative consequences, such as appearing less attractive or feeling sick (Grube, McGree, & Morgan, 1986). In addition, smokers have been perceived as less desirable to be in a close relationship with, such as being a roommate, a date, or a future spouse (Hines, 1996).

In social interactions where a smoker lights up a cigarette, both nonsmokers and ex-smokers claimed they usually react negatively and regard the interaction as interrupted and made more distant (Clark, 1978). There is a noted tendency for nonsmokers and ex-smokers to focus upon the smoke and ashes from a cigarette when being with someone who is smoking (Clark, 1978). Such distractions, along with the association of negative characteristics with cigarette smoking in social settings, may lead to discriminatory behaviors or actions on the part of nonsmokers.

In fact, discrimination against smokers in various settings seems to be increasing. Several workplaces have been strongly discouraging smoking on company property. Smoking bans outside of some office buildings have already been introduced, following management claims that smoking employees were blighting their companies' images (Chaudhary, 1997). Potential clients or customers may be offended by having to walk through cigarette smoke caused by company employees (Chaudhary, 1997). According to one source (Gilbert as cited in Sixel, 1998), smokers have been rated significantly lower by their bosses for dependability, cooperation, professionalism, and overall job performance. In addition, managers who smoke fared worse than their nonsmoking counterparts on tests of leadership qualities, relationships with coworkers, empowering, delegating, and candor. In the academic realm, 50% of college smokers reported being asked not to smoke at least once within the past year (Campbell, Svenson, & Jarvis, 1993). Locations for such requests included school, work, cars, restaurants, their own homes, and homes other than their own (Campbell, et al., 1993).

Although limited research has been done in university settings, results suggest that campus attitudes towards smokers mirror those of the larger culture. In the Campbell

et al. study, thirty percent of males reported that they had been asked not to smoke on their school's campus (Campbell, et al., 1993). Campbell et al. also noted that males were several times more likely to be asked not to smoke on campus than women.

Open and strident opposition to smoking in an increasing number of settings has actually prompted a backlash from those interested in defending smokers' rights. Vocal criticism of smokers has become so socially acceptable that many see smokers as a minority in need of defending. In For Your Own Good: The Anti-Smoking Crusade and the Tyranny of Public Health (1998), Jacob Sullum, a nonsmoker, rails against those eager to impose their choice to refrain from smoking on others. He defends the right to smoke, stating that smoking is a choice that should not be encroached upon, despite its associated health risks.

A variety of personal factors mediate attitudes toward smoking. For example, smoking status, smoking history, age, and contact with those suffering from smoking-related health problems all influence perceptions of smokers. Regular smokers' perceptions of smoking are less negative than nonsmokers (Clark, 1978; Grube, et al., 1986; Hines, 1996; Hines, et al., 1998; Dawley, Fleischer, & Dawley, 1985). Smokers perceived there to be social support for smoking (Grube, et al., 1986) and more positive (or less negative) social and physiological consequences of smoking than did other smoking status groups (Grube, et al., 1978; Hines et al., 1998; Dawley, et al., 1985; Clark, 1978). Occasional and former smokers' perceptions often fall in between nonsmokers and regular smokers' perceptions (Grube, et al., 1986; Hines, et al., 1998), as might be anticipated.

Although there is a basis for assuming that smokers in the present study will express more positive views of smokers in general, it is possible their membership in this increasingly ostracized minority may have the opposite effect on their attitudes. Members of other minority groups subject to discrimination,have been found to internalize the negative reactions of those around them (Clark & Clark, in Maccoby, Newcomb, & Hartley, 1958). Today's smokers may similarly have absorbed pervasive negative messages about their smoking behavior, and as a result become more critical of smokers in general.

Age also influences perceptions of smoking. Adolescents who experimented with cigarette smoking often did so because they associated smoking with toughness, sociability, precociousness, and extroversion (Hundleby, 1987; Imperato & Mitchell, 1986) and wanted to project an image associated with those descriptives. However, adult regular smokers perceived smoking to be relaxing (Hodges, Srebro, Authier, & Chambliss, 1999; Chassin, Presson, & Sherman, 1990; Clausen, 1987; Gilbert, 1979) and as a means to relieve stress (Chassin, et al., 1990; Clausen, 1987; Gilbert, 1979). Many adults may smoke for these reasons. Adult smokers have also been found to be less socially connected and more depressed (Anda et al., 1990; Glassman et al., 1988, 1990; Hemenway, Solnick, & Colditz, 1993; Stein, Newcomb, & Bentler, 1996), possibly utilizing cigarettes as a form of self-medication (Clausen, 1987; Gilbert, 1979). In addition to smoking status and age, close contact with someone suffering from a smoking-related illness can influence perceptions of smokers. Seeing the effects of a life-compromising addiction may persuade some people not to smoke or to reduce their nicotine intake.

Since past research has revealed powerful discriminatory biases against smokers in various settings, it seems reasonable to expect that attitudes toward college students who smoke may be quite negative on many campuses. In light of the numerous factors influencing perceptions of smoking, a comparison of nonsmokers', former smokers', and current smokers' views of college smokers was conducted in order to gauge the magnitude of such bias in college settings. This descriptive analysis will provide smokers the opportunity to learn what kinds of responses their cigarette smoking behavior elicits in the minds of college students and college faculty/staff. Because college professors are influential to students' future success, their negative views of smoking may inadvertently compromise student smokers' future opportunities and successes. Students' views are also important because they shape an undergraduates' socialization on campus. This study will help to clarify the extent to which negative attitudes toward smoking characterize college campuses today.

Methods

Participants

Respondents were 76 college faculty/staff members and 212 college students from a small liberal arts college from a suburban area in the Northeast United States.

Survey Instrument

The four-page survey, completed by students, consisted of items pertaining to features and determinants of college students' smoking, respondents' feelings associated with smoking behavior, and perceptions of college-age smokers. Questions regarding smoking history were used to determine the participants' smoking status (never, former, or current).

A shortened version of the original survey (abbreviated to maximize faculty/staff rate of return) was completed by college faculty and staff. Items regarding the respondent's smoking status and perceptions of college student smokers were identical to those found in the four-page survey.

Perceptions of smokers were assessed through 15 Likert-format items (1=Never, 2=Rarely, 3=Often, and 4=Very Frequently). Participants were asked "When you watch a college student smoke, how do they appear?" and directed to rate each of the following dimensions: inadequate, relaxed, anxious, physically fit, alert, energized, jittery, confident, inconsiderate, attractive, sophisticated, secure, immature, content, and intelligent.

Procedure

Students from introductory and upper-level courses volunteered to complete the four-page survey anonymously after class. Faculty/staff were sent the one-page survey through campus mail. Those faculty/ staff completing the anonymous survey returned it to a student researcher through campus mail.

Results

Ratings of target college student smoker characteristics were directionally adjusted so that high values reflected favorable evaluations of each trait. In order to assess people's perceptions of college student smokers, means and standard deviations were calculated for all the rated characteristics. A one-way ANOVA was used to compare responses given by those who have never smoked (N=118), former smokers (N=113), and those who currently smoke (N=56).

Across the three smoking status groups, no significant group differences were found on ratings of attractiveness, contentment, and sophistication (see Table A). Attractiveness was rated similarly by all groups; raters generally perceived smokers as unattractive (M=1.39, SD=.75). Likewise, smokers were viewed as generally unsophisticated (M=1.38, SD=.77), and all groups perceived smokers as rarely appearing content (M=2.02, SD=1.04).

Overall ratings indicated that smokers were generally seen as very rarely secure, intelligent, physically fit, or energized (see Table B). On these variables, significant differences emerged among the three smoking status groups. However, although ratings of these characteristics were found to differ significantly across groups, no group gave these favorable characteristics a mean rating of two ("rarely") or higher, therefore indicating a pervasive negative view of smokers. On each of these four characteristics, current smokers gave the lowest ratings, which indicates that they hold the most negative views of smokers. For example, current smokers rated perceived physical fitness lowest (M=1.20, SD=.82) followed by perceived intelligence (M=1.25, SD=.84). Current and former smokers also gave more negative ratings of smokers' perceived confidence and perceived alertness than those who never smoked (see Table C).

In contrast, on the remaining five characteristics, current smokers gave more favorable ratings than did the other two groups. Current smokers perceived smokers as appearing significantly less anxious, less jittery, more mature, more adequate, and more considerate than did the other two smoking status groups (see Table D).

Discussion

Overall, both college students and faculty/staff perceived smokers rather negatively. This stigma was also present when raters were grouped according to smoking status (never, former, or current smoker). While some characteristics were rated similarly across all status groups, at other times the ratings were staggered. For example, on some variables, current smokers showed the most negative views of smokers, while on others, nonsmokers endorsed more negative perceptions. Former smokers' ratings usually fell in between those of current smokers and nonsmokers. While it may be surprising that regular smokers showed the most negative view of smokers on some variables, this may suggest that many smokers are aware of the stigma which accompanies smoking and may have internalized this negative stereotype. Some current smokers may also be trying to motivate themselves to quit their habit by emphasizing certain negative associations to smoking.

In contrast, on other dimensions current smokers described smokers most favorably. It is possible that smokers' more positive ratings may stem from defensiveness about their habit. It is also possible that their views reflect projection of their own positive subjective experiences when smoking. Consistent with this, the dimensions rated most positively by smokers paralleled the favorable subjective states most associated with actual smoking behavior (Hodges, et al., 1999).

While such mixed responses on the part of current smokers may be puzzling, it is important to note that the negative responses given by current smokers may indicate a potential source of motivation to quit. This motivation to quit may stem from several factors, including a fear of possible discrimination. In order to maximize attempts at

smoking cessation, in addition to providing education about the health risks associated with this behavior, smokers should be informed about the possible social implications of their decision to smoke. For some, awareness of the negative stereotypes of smokers may serve as an additional incentive to quit smoking.

Future research might use the current methodology to compare attitudes toward smokers with attitudes towards those who engage in other health-risk behaviors. This would permit researchers to gauge the relative stigma associated with cigarette use.

TABLE A

	SMOKING STATUS	N	Mean	Std. Dev.		df	F	Sig.
	Never	113	1.39	.70	Betw.groups	2	.01	.99
	Ever	118	1.39	.75	Within			
	Current	56	1.38	.86	groups	284		
ATTRACTIVE	Total	287	1.39	.75	Total	286		
	Never	113	2.08	.93	Betw.groups	2	.30	.74
	Ever	118	1.97	1.04	Within			
	Current	56	2.02	1.23	groups	284		
CONTENT	Total	287	2.02	1.04	Total	286		
	Never	113	1.35	.65	Betw.groups	2	.24	.79
	Ever	118	1.39	.80	Within			
	Current	56	1.43	.93	groups	284		
SOPHISTICATED	Total	287	1.38	.77	Total	286		

TABLE B

	SMOKING STATUS	N	Mean	Std. Dev.		df	F	Sig.
	Never	113	1.88	.71	Betw.groups	2	5.44	.005
	Ever	118	1.64	.87	Within			
	Current	56	1.45	.95	groups	284		
ENERGIZED	Total	287	1.70	.84	Total	286		
	Never	113	1.83	.84	Betw.groups	2	14.15	.000
	Ever	118	1.42	.74	Within			
	Current	56	1.20	.82	groups	284		
PHYSIC. FIT	Total	287	1.54	.83	Total	286		
	Never	113	1.61	.80	Betw.groups	2	4.19	.02
	Ever	118	1.41	.79	Within			
	Current	56	1.25	.84	groups	284		
INTELLIGENT	Total	287	1.46	.81	Total	286		
	Never	113	1.91	.85	Betw.groups	2	9.04	.000
	Ever	118	1.62	.89	Within			
SECURE	Current	56	1.32	.88	groups	284		
	Total	287	1.68	.89	Total	286		

TABLE C

	SMOKING STATUS	N	Mean	Std. Dev.		df	F	Sig.
	Never	113	2.14	.80	Betw.groups	2	9.61	.000
	Ever	118	1.75	.92	Within			
	Current	56	1.55	1.03	groups	284		
ALERT	Total	287	1.87	.93	Total	286		
	Never	113	2.11	.86	Betw.groups	2	6.86	.001
	Ever	118	1.79	.97	Within			
	Current	56	1.57	1.02	groups	284		
CONFIDENT	Total	287	1.87	.96	Total	286		

TABLE D

	SMOKING STATUS	N	Mean	Std. Dev.		df	F	Sig.
NOT ANXIOUS	Never	113	2.02	.90	Betw.groups	2	10.54	.000
	Ever	118	2.49	1.09	Within			
	Current	56	2.77	1.36	groups	284		
	Total	287	2.36	1.12	Total	286		
MATURE	Never	113	2.14	.91	Betw.groups	2	7.92	.000
	Ever	118	2.42	1.25	Within			
	Current	56	2.89	1.38	groups	284		
	Total	287	2.40	1.18	Total	286		
ADEQUATE	Never	113	2.18	1.10	Betw.groups	2	10.95	.000
	Ever	118	2.64	1.35	Within			
	Current	56	3.13	1.40	groups	284		
	Total	287	2.55	1.31	Total	286		
NOT JITTERY	Never	113	2.13	.89	Betw.groups	2	5.56	.004
	Ever	118	2.48	1.07	Within			
	Current	56	2.66	1.34	groups	284		
	Total	287	2.38	1.08	Total	286		
CONSIDERATE	Never	113	2.13	.96	Betw.groups	2	5.74	.004
	Ever	118	2.50	1.22	Within			
	Current	56	2.73	1.38	groups	284		
	Total	287	2.40	1.18	Total	286		

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